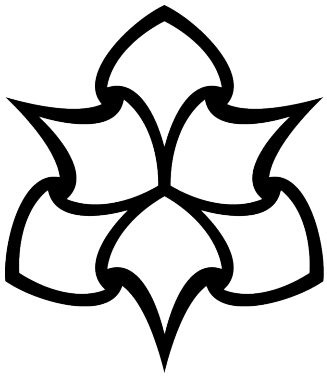

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Coherence between text comments and the quantitative ratings in the UK's National Student Survey.

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Abstract

Institutions are understandably interested in the profile of their own reputations based upon publicly available data about student experiences. The UK's National Student Survey (NSS) metrics are integrated into several 'Good University' calculations, whereas teaching teams most often use the survey's text comments to change practices, rather than the metrics directly. There is little information about how messages from the national survey's text comments relate to the accompanying numerical ratings, partly because text comments are confidential to the institution and unavailable for wide-scale research. We categorised institutional NSS text comments into themes that mirrored those of the original questionnaire. Comparisons were made between frequencies of thematic comments and the national ratings of satisfaction for several subject areas. For the first time we demonstrate broad agreement between comments about measures of teaching staff and course organisation with the performance of the subject areas (compared to metrics of their national counterparts). These findings are consistent with previous quantitative models predicting the most important factors that most influence overall satisfaction ratings. We intend this study to be a catalyst for other institutions to explore their non-publicly available, textual returns in a similar way. The outcomes of this type of work are pertinent to all countries that use large-scale surveys. However, institutions will need to release findings to a public audience if we are to gain a national/international perspective on this key linkage between publicly available metrics and the associated text comments.

Keywords: Student surveys, satisfaction, educational ratings

Introduction

For the past two decades, there has been considerable interest worldwide from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the development and use of mass student surveys (Gibbs 2010; Buckley 2012). The UK's National Student Survey (NSS) was designed to inform university applicants about their study choices and to provide a measure of institutional accountability at a national scale (Surridge 2009). However, it is clearly of benefit to institutions to perform well in the well-publicised survey, as HEIs compete for student applications and institutional prestige (Gibbs 2012). It is arguable that the impact of the national survey has increased beyond its intention and capabilities (see Langan et al. 2013) as it's outcomes are bring acted upon directly by HEIs in an attempt to improve their metrics as the priority, rather than a primary focus on the educational gains of its learners (Gibbs 2010; 2012). Apart from improvement of the learning experience quality itself, it is in the interest of institutions to enhance (directly) the survey metrics *per se* due to their public usage (Gibbs 2010). However, there are significant difficulties with the processes of contextualising the information generated by these large-scale survey instruments, from both local and national perspectives (Fielding et al. 2010, Langan et al. 2013).

The NSS (www.thestudentsurvey.com/content/nss2012_questionnaire_english.pdf) is carried out principally in the final year of undergraduate study and comprises 21 standard items (Q1-Q21; but note that an additional question about Students' Unions is now included). These are designed to rate student perceptions of their experiences of the whole course. The survey targets several thematic areas; Teaching, Assessment & Feedback (often considered separately; e.g. Marsh & Cheng 2008), Academic Support, Organisation & Management, Learning Resources and Personal Development. There is also a global measure of satisfaction with the course (Q22) and opportunity to add in other institution-specific questions. These are followed by the request for free text comments to capture the respondent's views of best practices and areas for improvement.

The questionnaire requires respondents to express strengths of agreement with the positive statements on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) with the central value of 3 indicating neutrality. Such an approach can be ambiguous and even misleading in terms of insights into the student experience (Blair et al. 2012). The NSS outcomes can highlight areas for targeted actions, but the metrics alone do not provide clarity around the nature of dissatisfaction (or non-satisfaction), which makes decision-making around learning design difficult (see Kovacs et al. 2010). Often, local decision-making is informed by the rich text comments provided by the survey, in conjunction with other quality enhancement procedures, to ultimately drive educational quality enhancement (Buckley 2012).

Despite its huge impact, there is little information about the congruence between the national survey's quantitative metrics and the associated qualitative comments. Staff at a local level have raised concerns that there is a push to 'enhance metrics' by responding to the textual comments. However, as far as the authors' are aware, there is currently is no evidence base in the literature that the comments and metrics in the UK's survey are substantially related. The lack of evidence of this important link is partly because text comments are confidential to the institution and are not publicly

available for wider comparisons. With availability of both types of information at an institutional level, there is good reason to explore any associations (or disassociations) between the qualitative and quantitative survey outputs and to share the findings with the wider academic community. The current study is proposed as a useful, exploratory study highlighting broad patterns only, and is not intended to contribute to the debate about concepts such as triangulation, abductive logic or the epistemologies that are debated in detail elsewhere (e.g. Kelle 2001). The central purpose is to identify links between the survey's text comments and the associated quantitative ratings, whilst retaining sufficient anonymity at an institutional level of the subject areas under scrutiny. We intend for this study to prompt discussion about the value of the survey which reveals its metrics publicly, but retains as confidential (at an institutional level) the valuable comments from respondents.

Methods

Premise and approach

Each year in the UK, NSS metrics are made available publicly via the Unistats website (http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/) but these are aggregated into broader subject areas (JACS3 level). Institutions participating in the NSS are provided with the anonymised text comments that are at a course level. This study used text comments from the 2011/12 National Student Survey returned to the home HEI. A thematic analysis was completed on the institutional NSS returns that assigned each student's text comment to the thematic categories that are used to group the quantitative survey themes (such as 'Teaching' and 'Learning Resources'; see Surridge 2009). Comments that related to other areas (such as university buildings or personal lives of respondents) were categorised as 'Other'. The analysis generated frequencies of comments assigned to the categories.

The overwhelming majority of comments (>95%) were very straightforward to classify both in terms of the coding systems and whether they were positive or negative. A few comments were more ambiguous. We adopted a policy of reflecting the student's emphasis on the comment. As an example, if a student wrote "some lecturers are good" in the positive comment area then we would classify this as a positive comment. Arguably, this could also be interpreted as some were not but since the student emphasis in this case was positive so it was classified as such. Likewise, if a student commented "some lecturers are poor" in the negative comment box then we would classify that as a negative as the emphasis is on the poor aspects of some staff. When comments mixed positive and negative "the course resources were insufficient, but the lecturers were very good" both elements were recorded in the spirit of the emphasis. In this case negative for resources, but positive for teaching staff. The thematic analysis was carried out by two researchers and at the start of this process, these 'raters' were in contact regularly to standardise any areas of uncertainty.

Two themes of the NSS ('Teaching' and 'Organisation and Management') are known to be of particular importance in predicting (quantitative) overall satisfaction ratings at a national level (e.g. Fielding et al. 2010; Langan et al. 2013). The 'Teaching' dimension was split for the purposes of the study as a means to isolate comments about

members of staff from comments about the design of the curriculum. The dominance of comments about individual staff in the survey returns and the large body of research indicating how teachers are crucial in ratings of the teaching experience (e.g. Marsh 2007) led to the focus being placed on comments about teaching staff. Here we explore how well frequencies of positive and negative comments related to the quantitative ratings of overall satisfaction (Q22) for courses (or groupings of courses) compared to their national counterparts. For example, NSS metrics of satisfaction for a degree in Law (note that this is not a subject included in the current study) would be compared to national levels of satisfaction for Law courses.

Survey responses to three general subject areas were explored, but to retain anonymity for institutional purposes, these are referred to as 'Areas' A, B and C. In Areas A (with four networks of courses) and B (with three networks of courses), the local organisation meant that data were aggregated in a way that did not allow individual courses to be isolated and directly related to national Overall Satisfaction (Q22) means. These two Areas are used in this study to show general patterns, i.e. the subject groupings in networks that perform well, or not, compared to national counterparts when the subject mix is considered together. It is noteworthy that there were generally consistent performances within networks to allow this generalisation to be made. For Area C, the specific courses were identifiable and thus had an exact national mean to be compared against. This Area was used to explore the reliability of indicator ratios (i.e. by multiplying the ratios of good/bad comments in 'Teaching' and 'Organisation and Management' themes) as correlates of national performance using national averages of the metrics for the subjects.

Calculation of the ratios and correlations

The general premise is that the ratio of 'positive versus negative' comments about staff would be higher in areas that perform well when compared to national counterparts. It was always the case that more negative comments were provided for the theme of Organisation & Management (O&M). The final ratio simply multiplied the ratios of the two themes, giving them equal weighting. This meant higher ratios express more positive comments about staff and less negative comments about course organisation. There was also an issue with no comments being made about some thematic areas in some cases. To account for zeros in the dataset, all frequencies of comments had one added (+1 in all cases) to ensure a ratio could be calculated. This allowed the calculation of ratios to be completed for all areas surveyed (since some had zero comments), but please note that the modification did not influence the ratings in the Likert scale (1-5) that the respondents completed in the original survey. Thus, the final calculation of the final ratio was:

Frequency of positive comments+1 (Teaching)Frequency of negative comments+1 (Teaching) x Frequency of positive comments+1 (Organisation & Management)Frequency of negative comments+1 (Organisation & Management)

Mean ratings of courses were compared to national means using publicly available national data (provided on http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/) for the subject areas in the institutional return of NSS data (which is not publicly available). Spearman's rank

correlation coefficients were calculated to explore relationships between the calculated ratios and the deviation of the course from the national mean level of satisfaction. All analyses were carried out using SPSS v19.0 (IBM Inc, Chicago, Illinois, USA).

Results

Areas A and B were used in the first exploration in a general sense as the subjects were embedded into 'networks' of courses. For the purposes of this study (and to retain course anonymity), the term network is used to indicate a set of related courses within each Area. This was achieved by considering together all the subjects taught in the networks, and providing an indication (only) of their collective performance at a national level. In all cases, there was a general consistency in performance of the subjects in their groupings, making this collective approximation straightforward. For example, there were no cases of one particular subject performing well in a grouping where others in the same grouping performed poorly (data not shown). It was clear in Area A (Figure 1) that the numbers of positive comments about the teaching staff were much higher in subject areas that performed well and, conversely, there were fewer negative comments about course organisation.

<insert Figure 1>

These patterns were present in the other subject areas, reflecting their relative performances, but were not as pronounced in Area B (Figure 2).

<insert Figure 2>

These results are summarised in Table 1, which shows the absolute values of the ratios of the thematic comments and the broad indicators of the performance of these subjects groups against national indicators. *<insert Table 1>*

For Area C, the absolute values of national performance in the 2011/12 NSS for each of the JACS3 level subjects were available and these correlated positively with the calculated ratios (r_s = 0.786 , n = 7, p = 0.036). Thus ratios of comments increased (reflecting generally more positive views of the respondents) in accordance with the subject performance nationally, reflecting higher frequencies of positive comments about teaching staff and fewer negative comments about course organisation for courses that were 'performing well' (see Figure 3). When carrying out correlations for the ratio of comments for each of the two items in the final ratio separately, both were positive but were not significant (for comments about staff; r_s = 0.464, n = 7, p = 0.294: and comments about course organisation; r_s = 0.500 , n = 7, p = 0.253).

<insert Figure 3>

Discussion

Capturing the student voice and then responding effectively, has obvious value in the evaluation and development of the success of courses. In a broad sense, this study has shown coherence between the metrics and text comments for this independently administered, national student survey. The patterns appear consistent across three disparate subject areas. There is a difficulty with reporting findings like this due to sensitivity of institutions about NSS data, primarily resulting from reporting of the data in public and local domains. Different subject areas need to be considered separately (Fielding et al. 2010) as they consistently receive different ratings of positive to negative comments and this may reflect many things, such as their cultural differences (see Gibbs 2012). We believe that 'what is written in the survey responses' and 'what scores are provided' do broadly relate. This is based on evidence from the combination of: (i) the broad patterns of higher ratios in subject areas that 'performed well' (i.e. above the national average) within the two Areas of networks of courses; and, (ii) the final curvilinear relationship when the ratios were explored at course level. The use of the two themes (i.e. ratings of 'Teaching' and 'Organisation and Management' only) was triggered by their dominance in the text comments, particularly in terms of comments about teaching, and their prevalence in previous quantitative models (e.g. Langan et al. 2013). We anticipated that courses that receive many positive comments about staff, and few comments about poor course organisation would score better in their metrics (for exploration of teacher effects on learner ratings of teaching see Marsh 2007). Primarily this was due to these particular themes of the survey being important in the quantitative models that predicted Overall Satisfaction (Q22; Langan et al. 2013). It is important to note that these are comparisons with national counterparts in general subject areas, rather than comparison against individual subjects. This was mostly due to the problems with comparing metrics from different subject areas (for detail about subject differences in metrics see Fielding et al. 2010; and Marsh & Cheng 2008; for an exploration of interpretations of the survey items see Blair et al. 2012). It is not straightforward to elucidate how the survey dimensions inter-relate. The 'teachers' could potentially have a strong influence on the respondents' views of other aspects of the survey (such as learning resources or assessment) and there is little understanding of how the national survey's responses (metrics and comments) reveal true educational gains (rather than what learners like; see Gibbs 2010). The need for in-depth explorations of these areas is apparent if decision-makers are to maximise the usefulness of the survey.

The lack of significance detected for correlations that explored separately the ratios of comments about staff and course organisation reinforces the need for multiple factors to be considered simultaneously in the consideration of the complex area of ratings of student satisfaction. It is notable that these analyses were limited in sample sizes due to the numbers of areas that can be reported on in the survey (n = 7 in this case). Also, the addition of 1 to all frequencies to allow ratios to be calculated introduces some bias to the correlations since it influences low sample sizes more greatly than higher those with higher frequencies (although the use of ranked correlations limits this bias and generally the patterns are clearly visible in all Areas). It also underlines the value of the initial observations of the data (i.e. that both 'Teaching' and 'Organisation and Management' are important as indicators when scrutinising the frequencies of text comments returned shown in Figures 1 and 2) which is how they

were interpreted in a broad sense locally and prompted this study in the first instance. There is potential to develop this work to the other themes of the questionnaire, but this would need greater numbers of comments about other themes of the survey (since comments about teaching, staff etc. dominated the return). It would also require sensitive data (i.e. the text comments) to be released from institutions to evaluate how consistent these patterns are for other institutions and courses at a national level.

The potential to internally survey students in earlier years (and in the term before the NSS is released to final year students) provides a significant opportunity to identify 'early warning indicators' using the ratios described in the current study. Many institutions have their own surveys in place and many include statements derived from the NSS. Subject areas that suddenly change in terms of comments about staff or course organisation would be useful to identify and be used to generate dialogue between staff and students to resolve issues earlier in the student lifecycle, and to enhance student perceptions of their experiences in tertiary education.

We acknowledge that this study provides a basic interpretation of the survey returns, designed only to highlight broad patterns in the text responses and the performance of subjects. Although often used, counts of the number of times that text comments relate to qualitative codes provide only a simple approach to gauge major patterns in questionnaire returns (Driscoll et al. 2007). Despite this 'data-reduction synthesis' losing information about the subtle differences between the respondents' comments, such analyses can detect general themes in responses and their popularity/value have led to qualitative data analysis software programs to carry out the thematic analysis. Such automation is prone to bias due to respondents who re-emphasise particular concepts (see Onwuegbuzie & Teddlie 2003). With sufficient research, such systems could be used for a rapid evaluation of areas that may be at risk of low levels of student satisfaction.

There is a need to build on the current findings to provide greater context to these conclusions. This should include debate about why certain aspects of the student experience have more influence on the ratings provided and which critical factors prompt certain ratings or comments to be recorded on the survey. This could be achieved by in-depth discussions with students surrounding the drivers of their responses, both in terms of text comments and metrics. This would require careful experimental design to protect students through anonymisation procedures, for example with researchers unconnected to their institution. In addition, further evaluations could be made about how students interpret the wording of questions in this survey (Blair et al. 2012) and how these interpretations differ from those of the academic staff who use the survey outcomes to enhance the quality of courses. A disadvantage commonly voiced by qualitative researchers is a loss of depth (and flexibility) that occurs when qualitative data are quantified (Driscoll 2007). Whereas the qualitative codes can provide insights into many interrelated conceptual themes (Bazeley 2004), the responses were reduced into a more 'one-dimensional' quantitative derivation by categorising them as simply positive or negative. Further work is required to clarify the underlying complexity behind apparently straightforward responses from simple numerical ratings (of 1-5) and the accompanying written comments that provide a much more detailed overview of the

experiences of the students. However, the findings are a first step to highlight areas to target surrounding the student voice and this supports the quantitative metrics that the respondents provided (Langan et al. 2013).

There is a large body of evidence that the NSS does not provide direct measures of educational gains (Gibbs 2010) and also it is noted that the survey is not intended to do this (Surridge 2009). In a slightly different area of study, Coates (2009) highlighted the difficulty of directly measuring the outcomes of training courses at a national level given the scale and diversity of training operations and contexts. This mirrors the difficulty with using national level surveys such as the NSS to capture student satisfaction at large scale, as this leads to output metrics being accepted without sufficient context (see Langan et al. 2013). The free comments provide greater depth and can inform those involved with the design of learning systems of areas to improve, but should be seen as the start of this process rather than the only evidence base (Buckley 2012).

The current study suggests that the ‘student voice’ captured in a national survey, in the form of text comments about the staff teaching on the courses and the organisation, relate in at least a broad sense to the questionnaire scores of overall satisfaction. There is potential for the use of these ratios as early warning systems if internal surveys are used to capture text comments during the full student lifecycle. The techniques described in the current study could be applied to earlier surveys to indicate areas that receive ‘poorer’ ratios of comments about teaching staff or course organisation. The ratios from the national survey described here could also be used to stimulate dialogue between students and staff about their learning experiences. This is not to preclude discussion about other elements of the learning experience, but the ratios could be used to reassure staff that links exist between these two forms of survey data. The wording of survey items may also influence the nature of comments that are volunteered by respondents, and it seems timely for other measures, such as engagement (Trowler & Trowler 2010) and belonging (Blair et al. 2012) to be used together with ratings of the experience to gain a better understanding of the complex nature of learners’ experiences of tertiary education.

Decades of empirical research (Pascarella and Terenzini 2005; Kuh et al. 2008) have affirmed that the active engagement of learners in effective training practices plays a critical role in developing high-quality outcomes. Lessons from the current study could be applied to qualitative comments from these alternative questionnaire designs such that, in addition to new metrics, the respondents should have reflected upon their senses of ‘belonging’ and/or ‘engagement’ before writing text comments. Future work could then begin to link ratings of the student experience with (self-assigned) measures of active involvement and feelings of belonging, using the current study as one method for such an exploration. Provision of such information in surveys would allow analysis of the associated comments after respondents have been asked to consider wider aspects of their experiences and could be followed by in-depth interviews with students to gain greater context as to why they responded as they did and what can be changed to enhance their satisfaction and learning gains. This wider view of the experience of university life, and the subsequent ways to process the outcomes, provide the next challenge to researchers of the student experience.

Notes on contributors

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